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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses cultural awareness within the context of 20th-century social changes in the United States and suggests that cultural awareness can be a protective factor in the maintenance of indigenous cultures and languages. Three business-related cultural changes have taken place in America during this century: the creation of the consumer culture, migration out of the inner cities to the suburbs, and the marketing of America within a new international culture of business. Those who are not aware of such cultural shifts risk the chance of becoming engulfed in them. To be culturally aware is to recognize the invisible doors that separate indigenous cultures from the business cultures of America. Such awareness of surrounding host cultures allows one to move between cultures without suffering cultural loss and to protect one's cultural values from being supplanted by the mores of another. (Author/SV)

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The Invisible Doors Between Cultures

Robert N. St. Clair

The concept of cultural awareness is discussed within the context of the recent commercial changes in America. Three cultural changes have taken place since the turn of the century: the construction of the consumer culture, the urbanization of America, and the marketing of America. Those who are not aware of these shifts risk the chance of becoming engulfed in them. For them the doors between their culture and the business cultures of America remain invisible and subject to entrapment. Hence, one can be protected from cultural loss by being aware of these surrounding host cultures.

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Many presenters at this conference have voiced concern about the forces that are causing their indigenous languages to disappear. It is my intent to address those very concerns. I want to discuss the structure of modern American culture. In our own lifetimes, there have been three major shifts in American culture. Around the turn of the century, American culture represented the super rich. It was a culture of the few, by the few, and for the few. This culture changed very rapidly into a "consumer culture" during the second decade of this century. By the end of the Second World War, it was an integral part of Modern America. The second major shift in American culture came about at the end of the War when General Motors put pressure on the American government to build more highways in order to sell cars. This phase is called the "urbanization of America" because people moved out of the inner city and into the suburbs. This situation was ideal as it meant that they had to drive to work every day. Modern American Culture is now located in Suburbia. The final shift in American culture is currently taking place. It is spearheaded by Business Schools in this country that are training their students in the science of marketing. This "marketing of America" constitutes the current phase of American culture because business schools are actively recruiting students from other countries in order to train them in the marketing of the business of culture (Ishii & St. Clair, 1996).

You are probably wondering why I am addressing the structure of Modern American Culture when this is a conference on stabilizing indigenous languages. There are several reasons for this focus. The first has to do with the fact that many crucial changes have taken place in American culture and they have been done quietly and effectively. These changes provide us with a model of rapid cultural change that can be used by us to save our indigenous languages. The second reason for discussing Modern American Culture is that it provides us with an instrument for cultural analysis. We can understand our own culture by comparing it and contrasting it with another. If the culture of opposition is not

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clearly defined in our minds, it will absorb us. We need to know when we are leaving our home culture in order to enter into another way of life. We need to know when we are leaving that host culture we return to our indigenous way of life.

There is an invisible door separating cultures. We need to sense that silent passage from one culture to another. We need to know that the door between these cultures are not closed. By understanding the structure of Modern American Culture, we can more readily reenter our home cultures. This is my reason for discussing the global social forces behind Modern American Culture.

The creation of the consumer culture

In 1915 something happened in America to change it forever. A small group of corporate executives met to discuss a crisis in their own business world. It appears that their factories had overproduced. Their warehouses were full of unsold products. The very rich were no longer buying their products. They had a crisis in overproduction. These business men approached the Ford Foundation for help. After a series of "brain storming" sessions, the sociology department of the Ford Foundation came up with a brilliant idea. They argued that the workday should be drastically reduced from 60 hours to 48 and that workers should be given larger salaries (Ewen, 1977). Now why would these business men be so generous? Why would they cut their own profits and share their wealth with the working class? It appears that these men did have ulterior motives. They created shopping centers (emporia) where their own products were sold. By having more money and more time to shop, the factory worker was able to purchase the very items that they produced at work. Advertisers were brought in to ensure that workers would be enticed by these luxury items (Sennett, 1978).

We should recall that over 11 million immigrants entered the United States around the turn of the century and these people resisted the new trends in America. To counter this resistance, the advertisers purchased and controlled 70% of all foreign newspapers in order to have direct access to these immigrants in their own native languages. When they noted how these European immigrants resisted changes that were good for business, they directed their advertising campaigns against them. One of these had to do with the fact that elders were respected by these immigrant families and the older men in the family were given first choice whenever a job became available. The advertisers began a "young is beautiful" campaign. They found the older workers to be inefficient and sought younger workers in their factories (Ewen, 1988). Another campaign by advertisers came in the form of an attack on the extended family. They felt that such group living patterns counteracted the narcissistic desires of the individual. They advocated nuclear families, smaller groups of individuals who were distanced from controlling forces of the older ways and traditions of their immigrant parents. Finally, these advertisers noticed that these immigrants liked to repair old clothes and fix broken objects rather than purchase new items (Ewen & Ewen, 1982). They considered this to be "un-Ameri-

can." To undo these habits, advertisers drew up another campaign in which they argued for "America as a throw away culture." Within a generation after this campaign was created, America had actually become a "throw away culture."

The urbanization of America

By the end of the Second World War, the consumer culture was a reality. It only took two generations to accomplish this feat. Since this exercise was highly successful, business men set about in creating another cultural shift favorable to commerce. This time the influence came from General Motors. This corporate giant wanted to sell more cars. They convinced Congress to build more highways and to sabotage passenger rail travel. During the Second World War, America had only two "military highways." One was Route 66 which traversed America from Coast to Coast and the other was the Alaskan Highway. Congress gladly initiated the building of superhighways across America. This country is now covered by ribbons of cement. Another way to increase car sales came with the creation of Urban America. People moved away from the cities and into the outskirts of the city. This change had nothing to do with overcrowding. It was a commercial movement (Jones, 1981). Every facet of the business world benefited from the urbanization of America. More new homes were sold, and these subdivisions needed two or more cars, new furniture, new appliances, and other commodities that one identifies with suburbia. Remember what we said about overcrowding. It was not a problem during the beginning of the Suburban Movement. To ensure that overcrowding would be a problem and that people would be enticed to move into the suburbs, an advertising campaign was created to encourage higher birth rates. The Baby Boomer Generation lasted from 1946 to 1964. More children were born at that time than any other in American history. The peak year was 1957 when 3.9 million babies were born. The urbanization of America was good for business.

The marketing of America

Just as the Baby Boom Generation was coming to a close, business men came up with another idea that was continue their traditions of wealth and dominance. This time, the idea was to sell American products overseas. The managerial elite from foreign countries were encouraged to study in the United States and become enculturated. Upon their return, they would provide a special commercial link with their native lands. Business students were of special interest to this movement because they would learn the art of marketing in America and export it to their own countries. This "marketing of America" means that the business culture is no longer limited to the United States. It is currently changing the way people feel, think, and live around the globe (Harris, 1980). This marketing of America has been so successful that it has created a new international culture of business with seven variants (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1992).

Crossing between disparate cultures

We have all had the experience of entering other cultures. When we leave our own culture, we leave through an "invisible door" that separates our culture from others. Most people are unaware of the fact that they are entering another culture. They know that they feel uncomfortable and different, but they do not know why. For those of us who study culture as our livelihood, we are usually well aware of the process of entering these other behavior domains of the host culture. We know that when we first enter into another culture we stand in this open doorway with our legs straddling both cultures. We are well aware that we have to act differently and speak a different language. We know that we have to eat different kinds of food and listen to different kinds of music. We even have to dress differently. But something magical happens once we truly enter the other culture. We forget that we are of another culture. We begin to dream in this other language, and we may even think differently. We may even forget that we look different and be shocked by our own images in the mirror.

When it is time to leave our host culture, we reverse our process of cultural reentry. We straddle the invisible doorway between cultures once again and consciously comment on the differences that separate our culture from theirs. After a few days, we return to our home cultures. Some have referred to these changes as "cultural shock" and "reentry shock." I think that these terms only make sense if one is not aware of the invisible door that separates his cultural world from those of others. I have made these journeys between cultures many times, and I do not consider them to be "shocking." What is important about this discussion of the invisible doors between cultures is our ability to be culturally aware. This ability is very important because it enables us to return to our home cultures without suffering cultural loss.

How to prevent cultural loss

If you are being influenced by another culture, you need to protect yourself from being absorbed by it. You do this by being aware of how your culture differs from the other culture. If you know that Modern American Culture is based on the commercial forces of consumerism, urbanization, and marketing, then you can readily separate your value system from it. Why is this important? It is important because when we do not know how our culture differs from another, we can be readily absorbed by that outer culture.

There are some people who have undergone severe cultural loss. They are changed by the social and cultural forces around them and remain unaware of these changes in their lives. What is perhaps the most frightening experience for those of us who are trying to retain indigenous cultures are those individuals who deliberately leave our home cultures to enter into another cultural world forever. This individual decision can become rather alarming when large groups of people leave the old way of life for another. This situation is alarming because we are at a lost about why they left and why they do not want to ever return.

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Conclusion

The more we know about the cultural forces around us, the more we are able to protect our culture from being overtaken by the mores of another. Many people assume that this is an "either/or" decision. It is not. We can leave our home cultures and return to them. We need not close the "invisible doors" that separate our culture from others. My discussion on three cultural shifts in Modern American Culture highlights the social forces that impinge on our lives (St. Clair, 1997). If we are unaware of these forces, the "invisible door" may close forever behind us. If we are aware of them, however, we can always return to our home cultures.

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